

Raíces

"All this pressure is eating me up inside
And I feel like I'm being buried alive again."

Tui

When Est left, the studio settled into its familiar rhythms. The bell above the door chimed as it closed behind him, and I watched through the window as he made his way down the street—shoulders straighter than they'd been a week ago, steps more purposeful. He was healing. Slowly, imperfectly, but healing.

Good, I thought. That's all any of us can do.

The sound of Hong's tattoo machine drifted from the private room—that steady, rhythmic buzz that had become the soundtrack of my life. We were using that space more and more lately. It made sense; some clients wanted privacy for their sessions, especially for pieces in sensitive locations or with personal significance. Hong had a gentle way with nervous clients, a quiet patience that put people at ease.

I couldn't see him from where I was sitting, but I could hear the occasional murmur of conversation between him and his afternoon client. Something about a memorial tattoo, I remembered from the booking. A client who'd lost someone and wanted their memory inscribed on skin.

Those were always the hardest sessions. Not technically—technically, memorial pieces were often simpler, more symbolic—but emotionally. You couldn't do that kind of work without absorbing some of the grief. Hong would be drained tonight. I made a mental note to check on him later.

Yuki was at her station, bent over the wrist of a pink-haired girl who looked no older than twenty. The girl was small, delicate, her body scattered with tiny colorful tattoos that could easily be mistaken for moles if you weren't looking closely. A red dot here. A blue speck there. A constellation of intentional marks that formed a private map only she understood.

Yuki was adding to the collection—a small lotus, rendered in her precise traditional style but scaled down to fit the intimate canvas of the girl's inner wrist. The contrast was striking: Yuki's bold, confident lines contained in such a small space, her technique adapted without being compromised.—one of those clients whose collection consisted entirely of tiny, colorful micro-tattoos. A strawberry on an ankle. A star behind an ear. Some were so small they could easily be mistaken for moles or freckles rather than ink.

I watched her work for a moment, appreciating the way she held herself. The straight spine. The steady hands. The complete focus that blocked out everything

except the needle and the skin.

That's what mastery looks like, I thought. That's what I'm still working toward.

I turned my attention to the notebook in front of me.

The sketch was for my next project—a larger piece, more ambitious than anything I'd attempted in months. A full right arm sleeve, flowers and vines wrapping from shoulder to wrist, a garden contained on skin. The client had been specific in her requests. She'd given me a list of flowers she wanted to include, each one meaningful in some way she hadn't fully explained. Roses, obviously—everyone wanted roses. But also more unusual choices: protea, heliconia, bird of paradise. Names I'd had to look up, shapes I'd had to study. She'd also sent examples from my previous work, pieces she'd found online that had drawn her to my studio in the first place. My earlier designs. My signature style.

Flowers, fruits, different kinds of plants and vegetables.

That's what I'd been known for, once. The naturalistic work. The organic forms rendered with careful attention to texture and shadow and the particular way that living things caught the light.

Growing up in a small town had given me that. The joy of knowing plants intimately—not just what they looked like, but how they grew. How they changed with the seasons. How they smelled after rain, how they bent in the wind, how their colors shifted from morning to evening.

My grandmother's garden had been my first classroom. Vegetables in neat rows, herbs in terracotta pots, flowers climbing every available surface. I'd spent hours there as a child, watching things grow, learning their names, developing the observational skills that would later become the foundation of my art.

When I'd started tattooing, it had felt natural to bring that knowledge with me. To translate the organic world onto skin. To create gardens that would never wilt, flowers that would never fade.

At least, that's how it used to feel.

I stared at the photos displayed on my computer screen.

The client had sent reference images—high-resolution photographs of the specific flowers she wanted. Protea from South Africa, with their distinctive cone-shaped heads and feathery petals. Heliconia from Central America, those dramatic claw-like blooms in shades of red and orange. Bird of paradise from the tropics, elegant and alien, unlike anything that grew in my grandmother's garden.

They were beautiful.

But they were also just images. Flat. Static. A single moment captured from a single angle, frozen in time. One photograph didn't seem to give my hand a real idea of how they looked. How they should move. How the light would change the colors. How they would appear from a different angle, or at a different time of day, or in different weather.

I'd been staring at these pictures for hours, trying to understand the flowers well enough to recreate them. Trying to imagine them in three dimensions, to feel the weight of their petals, to know intuitively how they would curve and fold and catch shadows.

But I couldn't.

Because I'd never seen them in person. Because my knowledge, once so complete for the plants of my small hometown, was failing me when it came to the wider world.

The frustration had been building for months now. It wasn't just this client, this project. It was a pattern I'd been noticing more and more, a gap in my skills that seemed to widen with every new commission.

Plants native to other countries were increasingly sought after in art. Clients didn't want roses anymore—or rather, they wanted roses and exotic species, combinations that spanned continents, designs that required knowledge I didn't possess.

Every time a new client appeared with a complicated plant name that I could barely pronounce, I would search for more books. More information online. More reference images and botanical illustrations and scientific diagrams that broke flowers down into their component parts.

And every search only made me feel more ignorant.

The more I learned, the more I realized how little I knew. There were thousands of species I'd never seen. Tens of thousands of variations within those species. A whole world of organic forms that existed beyond my small-town experience, beyond my grandmother's garden, beyond everything I'd built my career upon.

How do you tattoo something you've never touched? I wondered. How do you capture the essence of a flower you've never smelled, never held, never watched unfold in real time?

I didn't have answers.

I only had the growing awareness that my limitations were catching up with me.

I picked up my pencil again, forcing myself to focus.

The protea was the centerpiece of the design—the client had been insistent about

that. She wanted it positioned near the shoulder, large enough to make a statement, surrounded by smaller blooms that would cascade down the arm.

I'd drawn it three times already. Three different interpretations, each one discarded as not quite right. The shape was correct—I could replicate the photograph accurately enough. But there was something missing. Something I couldn't capture from a flat image alone.

Dimension, I thought. Movement. The sense that this is a living thing, not just a pattern.

That's what my best work had always had. That vitality. That sense that the flowers on skin might start growing at any moment, might unfold and bloom and change.

But I couldn't fake it with species I didn't know. I couldn't imagine the protea's weight, its texture, the way its petals would overlap and catch the light. I couldn't feel it the way I felt the roses and sunflowers and lavender I'd grown up with.

The pencil hovered over the paper. I made a few tentative lines, then erased them.

Started again. Stopped.

The frustration tightened in my chest like a fist.

I sighed, setting down the pencil with more force than necessary.

The sound of Yuki's machine had stopped. I looked up to see her cleaning the fresh tattoo, her movements gentle and precise as she wiped away the excess ink and blood. The pink-haired girl was craning her neck to look at her wrist, her expression transforming from nervous anticipation to something approaching wonder.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. "It's exactly what I wanted."

"I'm glad." Yuki's voice was warm but professional. "Remember the aftercare instructions. No submerging in water for two weeks. Moisturize regularly. Avoid direct sunlight while it's healing."

"I know, I know." The girl laughed, still staring at her new lotus. "This is my ninth tattoo. I've got the routine down."

"Nine is a good number." Yuki began applying the protective covering. "Any plans for a tenth?"

"Already thinking about it." The girl grinned. "Maybe a matching one on the other wrist? Something to balance it out?"

"Come back when you're ready. We'll design something together."

I watched the exchange with something like envy. That ease. That confidence. Yuki

knew exactly what she was doing with every line, every curve, every shadow. Her traditional training had given her centuries of technique to draw on, a foundation so solid that she could adapt it to anything.

What's my foundation? I wondered. A garden that's thousands of miles away? Memories that fade a little more each year?

The pink-haired girl left with her fresh lotus protected under plastic wrap, practically bouncing with happiness. Yuki cleaned her station with methodical precision, each tool returned to its designated place. She'd been here less than a week, but she'd already adapted to the studio's rhythms, finding her space within our established patterns.

She caught me watching and raised an eyebrow. "Deep thoughts?" she asked, her accented Thai making the question sound almost poetic.

"Something like that."

"Want to share?"

I considered the offer. Yuki was a guest—she'd be gone in another week, moving on to the next studio on her Southeast Asian tour. There was a freedom in that. A lack of consequences. I could say things to her that I might not say to people who'd remember them long-term.

"I'm struggling with a design," I admitted. "Flowers I've never seen in person. I can copy the photographs, but I can't... feel them."

Yuki nodded slowly, understanding in her expression. "This is a common problem for botanical artists. The difference between seeing and knowing."

"How do you handle it?"

"In Japan, we train for years before we're allowed to tattoo our own designs." She finished wiping down her counter and turned to face me fully. "Part of that training is observation. We don't just look at reference images—we study the real thing. We go to gardens, to greenhouses, to flower markets. We sit with a single flower for hours, drawing it from every angle, until we understand it completely."

"That sounds... time-consuming."

"It is." She smiled slightly. "But it's also necessary. You cannot capture something you do not truly know. The hand follows the understanding. Without understanding, the hand is just copying."

I thought about my grandmother's garden again. About the hours I'd spent there as a child, not trying to learn anything, just existing among the plants. Absorbing their shapes, their rhythms, their particular ways of being.

That's what I was missing with the exotic flowers. That deep, intuitive knowledge that came from direct experience rather than secondhand images.

"What would you do?" I asked. "If you had a commission for plants you'd never encountered?"

Yuki considered the question. "I would find them. However I could. A botanical garden, perhaps. A specialty nursery. Whatever it took to sit with the real thing before I tried to put it on skin."

Find them.

The idea seemed so simple. So obvious. And yet somehow I'd never thought of it in those terms. I'd been treating the problem as a research question—something to be solved with more photographs, more books, more information gathered from a distance. It had never occurred to me to actually go see the flowers I was trying to draw.

Why not?

Hong's session finished shortly after. I heard the door to the private room open, then the murmur of final consultations—aftercare instructions, follow-up scheduling, the gentle rhythm of a session ending. His client emerged first, a man in his forties with red-rimmed eyes and a fresh bandage on his forearm. Memorial tattoo, I remembered. Someone he'd lost.

Hong followed a moment later, his expression carefully neutral in the way it got when he was processing heavy emotions. His silver hair was slightly mussed, probably from running his hands through it during the session—a nervous habit he'd never quite broken.

"Okay?" I asked quietly as he passed my station.

"Fine." He didn't meet my eyes. "Just need a minute."

I nodded and let him go. He disappeared toward the back room, where the small couch and the coffee machine offered some semblance of privacy.

I'll check on him later, I thought again. After he's had time to decompress.

The afternoon was fading.

The light through the windows had gone golden, then orange, as the sun descended toward the horizon. The street outside was busier now—people heading home from work, restaurants preparing for dinner service, the city shifting from one mode to another.

I looked at my notebook again. At the half-finished sketch of the protea, all wrong

angles and uncertain lines.

Find them, Yuki had said. However you can.

There was a botanical garden on the outskirts of the city. I'd been there once, years ago, on a school trip that I barely remembered. Did they have exotic species? Probably. Most botanical gardens did—that was kind of the point.

And there were specialty nurseries. Florists who imported unusual flowers for upscale events and discerning customers. Places where I might be able to see a real protea, a real heliconia, a real bird of paradise.

Places where I could learn, the way I'd learned in my grandmother's garden.

The idea took root slowly, unfurling like the very plants I was trying to capture. What if I actually did it? I wondered. What if I stopped trying to solve this problem from behind a desk and actually went out into the world? It would take time. Effort. A willingness to admit that my current approach wasn't working. But sitting here, staring at photographs that couldn't teach me what I needed to know—that wasn't working either.

Hong emerged from the back room, looking slightly better.

"Hey," he said, dropping into one of the waiting area chairs. "Rough session."

"I figured."

"Memorial piece. His daughter. Car accident, three years ago." Hong's voice was flat, reciting facts rather than processing emotions. "He cried the whole time. Not sobbing—just this quiet, steady stream of tears. Like he'd been saving them."

"That's heavy."

"Yeah." Hong rubbed his face with both hands. "But the tattoo is beautiful. Her name, with some cherry blossoms—she loved spring, apparently. He said it felt like having part of her back."

I nodded, understanding the weight of that kind of work. The responsibility. The privilege of being trusted with someone's grief.

"You did good," I said. "Giving him that."

"I hope so." Hong glanced at my notebook, at the frustrated sketches scattered across the page. "What's eating you?"

"Exotic flowers I can't draw properly."

"The protea thing?"

"Yeah." I sighed. "I've been staring at photographs for hours and I still can't get it right. Yuki says I need to see them in person, actually study the real thing before trying to put it on skin."

"She's probably right." Hong stretched, his joints popping audibly. "You've always been good with plants. But you're good with the ones you know. The ones you grew up with."

"Exactly." I tapped my pencil against the desk, a restless rhythm. "And now clients want species I can barely pronounce, from countries I've never visited. How am I supposed to capture something I've never actually experienced?"

"Go experience it?"

"That's what Yuki said."

"Then maybe you should listen." Hong grinned slightly, the first genuine expression I'd seen from him since the session ended. "There's a botanical garden, right? The one out past the university?"

"Yeah."

"So go. Bring a sketchbook. Spend a day actually looking at the flowers instead of just looking at pictures of them."

It sounded so simple when he said it. So obvious. But sometimes the obvious things were the ones we most needed to hear.

Yuki was packing up for the day. Her station was immaculate, every tool cleaned and stored, the surfaces gleaming. She had dinner plans with friends—other artists she'd connected with during her time in Bangkok—and her energy had shifted from focused professional to anticipatory social.

"Good session today," I told her as she gathered her bag. "The lotus was beautiful."

"Thank you." She paused at the door, looking back at me with those observant eyes. "Think about what I said. About finding the flowers. The best work comes from real understanding, not just reference images."

"I will."

"Good." She smiled—brief but warm. "See you tomorrow."

The door chimed as she left.

And I sat there in the fading light, surrounded by half-finished sketches and the echo of good advice, trying to figure out how to grow beyond the limits of my own experience.

The studio was quiet now.

Hong had retreated to the back room again, probably scrolling through his phone or working on designs for his upcoming exhibition. The street outside had quieted too, the rush hour crowd dispersing to their various destinations.

I stared at the protea sketch one more time.

Find them, Yuki had said.

Go experience it, Hong had echoed.

Maybe they were right. Maybe the solution wasn't more research, more photographs, more trying to understand from a distance. Maybe the solution was simpler and harder at the same time: actually going to see the things I was trying to create.

My grandmother's garden had taught me everything I knew about the plants I loved. It made sense that I'd need new gardens, new experiences, new encounters to expand that knowledge. I closed the notebook and set down my pencil.

One step at a time, I thought. Just like Est. Just like everyone.

We were all learning. All growing. All trying to become something more than we currently were. The difference was whether we let the struggle stop us, or whether we used it as a reason to keep moving forward. I chose forward. I always had.

I looked back at my sketchbook.

The vines looked stiff. Rigid. Like they'd been carved from wood rather than grown from soil. They lacked the organic flow that made real plants beautiful—that sense of movement, of reaching, of life straining toward sunlight. These were dead lines on dead paper, and no amount of shading or refinement would bring them to life.

The flowers were even worse. Flat. Static. Petals that sat on the page like pressed specimens in a Victorian collection—preserved but lifeless, their colors muted, their essence lost. I'd drawn them from photographs, and the photographs' limitations had become my limitations. A camera could capture a moment, but it couldn't capture the way a flower moved when the wind touched it. It couldn't show how the petals felt between your fingers, or how the stem curved under the weight of the bloom, or how the color shifted as light filtered through the translucent edges.

It was a drawing of a drawing.

Not a drawing of a living thing.

And that difference was everything.

That difference was the gap between work that made people catch their breath and work that made them nod politely before moving on. It was the gap between the artist I dreamed of being and the artist I was settling for being. It was the gap between excellence and adequacy, and I'd spent my whole career trying to stay on the right side of that line.

Now I was slipping. Now I was failing.

And the client was counting on me to deliver something extraordinary, something worthy of being permanently inscribed on her skin, and I couldn't even draw a convincing protea from a photograph.

I need to see them, I realized.

The thought crystallized in my mind with sudden, terrible clarity.

I need to see real ones.

Not photos on a screen—those flat, filtered images that stripped away dimension and context and the thousand subtle details that made real flowers real. Not pressed specimens in dusty botanical books, their colors faded to sepia, their forms crushed into two dimensions, their life drained away in the name of scientific preservation. Living, breathing plants. Flowers that moved when you touched them. Petals that caught the light at angles no photograph could capture. Stems that bent and curved with the weight of their blooms. The whole, complex, miraculous reality of organic life, present and immediate and impossible to reduce to a single image.

That's what I needed.

That's what my art needed.

The thought made my heart do a traitorous little flip in my chest.

Lego.

The name surfaced in my mind before I could stop it, bringing with it a cascade of images and sensations that I'd been trying—unsuccessfully—to suppress for weeks.

Lego, who worked in a flower shop. He'd been arranging a display in the window, his long hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, his hands moving among the blooms with unconscious grace. He'd looked like he belonged there—like the flowers had grown around him, like he was part of the same ecosystem, another beautiful living thing among the petals and stems.

Lego, who smelled like blooms and green stems. I remembered that from the night. The night when everything had gone wrong, when he'd shown up at the studio looking like something precious that had been carelessly broken. Even then, through the tears and the panic and the overwhelming need to protect him, I'd noticed the

way he smelled. Fresh. Growing. Like something that would bloom if you gave it enough light.

Lego, who had looked at me with those wide, trusting eyes when I'd helped him after the William disaster. The memory of that look haunted me. The way he'd let me take care of him, let me carry him up the stairs, let me be present for his pain. The vulnerability he'd shown. The trust he'd offered without asking for anything in return.

No one had looked at me like that in a long time.

No one had trusted me so completely, so instinctively.

And the responsibility of it—the weight of being someone's safe place—sat heavy in my chest every time I thought about him. I hadn't seen him properly since that night.

Just brief glimpses. Moments caught in passing, like photographs of photographs—flat and insufficient and leaving me hungry for more. The wave on the sidewalk, when he and Hong had walked off together. He'd been wearing that oversized black sweatshirt with the pink bows, and his shorts had shown too much of his legs, and I'd watched them go until they turned the corner and disappeared from view.

The texts we'd exchanged—brief check-ins, surface-level conversations. Are you okay? I'd asked. I'm fine, he'd replied, the words giving nothing away.

The space between us that I'd deliberately maintained, even as every instinct told me to close it.

You should ask for a date, Hong had said. The words echoed in my memory, teasing and knowing and uncomfortably accurate.

But I wasn't asking for a date. I was asking for... professional consultation. Research assistance. Educational support. A favor from a friend who happened to be an expert in the exact subject I was struggling with.

Lego knew flowers. Knew them intimately, professionally, with the kind of deep understanding that came from working with them every day. He could tell me about the protea—how it grew, how it moved, how it felt. He could show me specimens I'd never find in photographs. He could give me the direct experience that my art so desperately needed.

That was allowed, wasn't it? That was safe. That was just... colleagues helping colleagues. Friends helping friends. Artists supporting each other's growth. Nothing more.

Nothing dangerous.

Nothing that would lead to heartbreak.

I picked up my phone.

The screen glowed to life, illuminating my face in the darkening studio. Lego's name was right there in my contacts, near the top of the list because we'd been texting recently. Just a few taps and I could send him a message. Just a simple request: Hey, I'm working on a design with some exotic flowers and I could use some expert guidance. Any chance you could help?

Professional. Casual. Nothing that would reveal the way my pulse quickened when I thought about seeing him.

My thumb hovered over his name.

Just ask, I told myself. It's about the art. It's about the work. It's about becoming a better tattoo artist, serving your clients more effectively, expanding your skills in a way that will benefit your career.

All true. All perfectly logical. All completely insufficient to explain the trembling in my hands.

I hesitated.

Put the phone down.

Stared at the sketchbook again, at the disappointing flowers, at the evidence of my limitations. Picked the phone up again.

Just do it, the impulsive part of me urged. Send the message. What's the worst that could happen?

But I knew what the worst was. The worst was wanting something I couldn't have. The worst was getting too close and watching everything fall apart. The worst was becoming another story of love gone wrong, another cautionary tale for future generations to shake their heads at.

It's just about the art, I told myself again. It's just about the work.

But my thumb still hovered, and the butterflies in my stomach told a different story entirely.

I looked at the name one more time.

Just four letters on a glowing screen. Just a contact in my phone, like any other. Just a friend who could help me with a professional problem. But I never wrote the message.

My thumb retreated. My hand lowered the phone back to the desk, setting it down

with a soft click that seemed to echo in the quiet studio. My heart, which had been beating too fast for something so simple, gradually slowed to something approaching normal.

This was for the best.

I told myself that firmly, with all the conviction I could muster. This was for the best.

I wouldn't ruin anyone. I'd seen too many people ruined by love—seen the wreckage it left behind, the walking wounded who kept trying even after everything had fallen apart. I wouldn't add to that count. I wouldn't be the reason someone else learned to be afraid of connection.

I would never do to them what was done to me. The thought surfaced before I could stop it, bringing with it a flash of memory I usually kept buried. A face I tried not to remember. Words I tried not to hear. The particular devastation of being loved.— Never again, I'd promised myself afterward. Never again will I let someone hurt me like that. And never will I be the one who hurts someone else.

It was a vow I'd kept for years.

It was a vow I intended to keep forever.

Love only seemed to ruin everything.

The thought unfurled in my mind like a poisonous flower—beautiful in its terrible clarity, undeniable in its accumulated evidence. With everything I saw, with every story I witnessed, I could only think about how everyone suffered when they loved.

I thought about my mother.

I could see her clearly, even now—sitting at the worn kitchen table in our small house, phone pressed against her ear, listening to whatever the village gossips had said this time. The tears streaming down her face. The way her shoulders shook with silent sobs. She loved me. That was never in question. Even when my father's family whispered that I'd brought shame on the family name. Even when the neighbors looked at her with pity or suspicion. Even when the easy life she'd expected became complicated in ways she'd never anticipated.

She loved me, and that love had cost her something. Peace of mind. Standing in the community. The simple ease of existing without her child becoming a topic of speculation and judgment. I'd watched love hurt her. Watched it extract payment for the privilege of caring about someone who didn't fit the expected mold.— Is that what love is? I'd wondered, even as a teenager. Is it just pain with a prettier name?

I thought about my sister.

Beautiful, who had done everything right. Who had married the man everyone

approved of. Who had built the life she was supposed to build, following every rule, meeting every expectation. She'd come home with her complicated pregnancy, eyes hollow, hands shaking. The truth spilling out between sobs: Her husband had been cheating. For years. With multiple women. She'd known—had suspected, at least—but kept forgiving him because she loved him.

Because love made you stupid.

Because love made you overlook the obvious. Because love made you stay in places you should have fled from long ago, accepting crumbs of affection and calling them nourishment. She'd forgiven him again and again, each time hoping this would be the last betrayal, the final hurt before things got better. And he'd taken that forgiveness as permission, kept pursuing his appetites while she maintained the home and the facade and the fiction that everything was fine.

Love had made her blind. Had made her accept treatment she never would have tolerated from a stranger. Had made her build a life on a foundation of lies because she couldn't bear to walk away from the emotion she'd invested.—Is that what love is? I'd thought, watching her rebuild. Is it just a different kind of prison?

I thought about Est.

God, I thought about Est so often these days.

Every time a boy crossed his path, it ended in disaster. Every time he opened his heart, someone found a new way to break it. The pattern was so clear, so obvious, so painfully predictable—and yet he kept trying, kept reaching out, kept believing that this time would be different.

William was just the latest in a series of devastations.

Before William, there had been others. Names I barely remembered, faces that blurred together in my memory. Men who'd taken what Est offered—his attention, his affection, his desperate need to be loved—and then discarded him when something more convenient came along.

I'd watched Est cry more times than I could count. Watched him pick himself up, dust himself off, convince himself that the next one would be better. Watched him walk straight into another heartbreak with his eyes wide open, because hope was a harder habit to break than he wanted to admit.—Is that what love is? I'd wondered, holding him while he sobbed. Is it just hope that refuses to die, even when it should?

I thought about Nut.

Bright, energetic Nut, who seemed to only think about Hong. Who sent messages that went unanswered for days. Who pursued and pursued and pursued, his entire emotional life oriented around someone who kept him at arm's length. Every time I

saw him, he asked about Hong. Have you seen Hong? Is Hong coming in today? Tell Hong I said hi—no, wait, don't tell him, play it cool.

The desperation was obvious to everyone except, apparently, Nut himself.

He'd arranged his whole existence around the possibility of Hong's attention. Made decisions based on where Hong might be. Scheduled his life around chances to see someone who couldn't even be bothered to respond to a text about a cat in sunglasses.—Was that love? Or was it just obsession wearing a more socially acceptable costume?

The line between devotion and desperation seemed very thin from where I was standing.

And I thought about myself.

About how I couldn't stop thinking about Lego.

About how every thought seemed to circle back to him eventually, no matter where I started. About the protea sketch that had led me here, to a phone I couldn't bring myself to use, to a message I couldn't bring myself to send. About the way I'd helped him that night—not just out of basic human kindness, but because seeing him hurt had felt like a physical wound in my own chest. Like his pain was my pain. Like we were connected in ways I didn't understand and couldn't control.

That terrified me.

That was the most dangerous thing of all.

Because I knew where this led. I knew how the story ended. I'd seen it play out a dozen times in the lives of people I cared about, and the ending was always the same: tears, regret, the slow realization that love was just a pretty word for suffering. If I let myself care about Lego—really care, not just the careful, controlled affection I currently allowed myself—I would hurt him. Or he would hurt me. Or we would hurt each other in ways neither of us could predict. That was how love worked.

That was what love did.

And I refused to be another cautionary tale.

Before I could let my thoughts drag me further down...

Into that dark place where love was only pain and connection was only loss. Into the spiral that could consume hours if I let it, the whirlpool of memory and fear that pulled everything into its depths. Into the certainty that I was better off alone, that isolation was safety, that the absence of love was preferable to the presence of eventual heartbreak. Before I could sink so deep that I couldn't find my way back to

the surface...

Hong appeared in the back doorway. He was blowing his nose with a handkerchief—white fabric, slightly crumpled, the kind of practical item he always seemed to have on hand. His eyes were red-rimmed, probably from the emotional weight of the memorial session. Or maybe from his own suppressed feelings, the grief he absorbed from clients without ever fully releasing. In his other hand, awkwardly balanced against his elbow, was a broom.

The mundane tool broke the spell somehow. Its ordinariness pulled me out of my spiraling thoughts and back into the concrete, practical present. There was a studio to close. Tasks to complete. The rhythm of routine that didn't care about emotional turmoil or philosophical despair.

"Closing time," Hong said, his voice slightly nasal, words muffled by the handkerchief. "You zoning out, or are you going to help?"

They had to clean. They had to close the shop.

The evening routine that happened every day, regardless of heartbreak or complicated feelings or flowers I couldn't draw or messages I couldn't send. That was good. That was something to turn toward. Something to occupy my hands and my mind. Something that would stop me from sinking further into the darkness I could feel waiting at the edges of my thoughts.

"I'll sweep," I said, pushing back from the desk with more force than necessary.

Hong tossed me the broom. I caught it automatically, the familiar weight grounding me in physical reality—wood and bristles and the simple satisfaction of a tool designed to do exactly one thing.

"You okay?" he asked, studying me with those perceptive eyes. "You had that face. The thinking-too-hard face."

"I'm fine."

"Liar." But he didn't push. He just moved toward the register, his own demons apparently tamed enough for functional behavior. "Let me know if you want to talk about it. Or don't. But the offer's there."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"That's definitely a lie." He started counting bills, his movements practiced and efficient. "But I'll pretend to believe you for now. Seems kinder than pointing out the obvious."

I swept. The physical motion was meditative in a way that thinking never was. Back and forth. Back and forth. The bristles scraping against the floor, gathering dust and

debris into neat piles. Simple work. Controllable work. The kind of labor that occupied the body while giving the mind permission to quiet down. I focused on the sensation of the broom in my hands. The resistance of the floor beneath my feet. The particular sound of bristles against concrete. Small, concrete things that I could observe without judging, experience without analyzing.

The sketchbook sat on my desk, still open to the failed protea drawing. Tomorrow's problem. Tonight's job was just getting through tonight without falling apart completely. Hong finished counting the register and moved on to wiping down surfaces. We worked around each other with the efficiency of long practice, two people who'd done this dance so many times it had become automatic.

The silence between us was comfortable. Not awkward. Not loaded with things unsaid. Just... quiet. The kind of quiet that good friends could share without feeling the need to fill it.

I was grateful for that. Grateful for Hong, who knew when to push and when to back off. Who could see I was struggling but didn't demand explanations I wasn't ready to give.

This is what friendship is, I thought. This is what relationships can be without the romantic complications. Maybe this was enough. Maybe this—colleagues and chosen family, people who cared without the intensity of romantic love—was all I needed. Maybe the wanting I felt for Lego was just... a temporary disruption. Something that would fade if I ignored it long enough. A phase to be endured rather than indulged.

Maybe.

The word felt hollow even in my own thoughts but I kept sweeping anyway.

Because that's what you did when the world felt overwhelming.

You kept moving. You kept putting one foot in front of the other, trusting that eventually, the path would become clear.

And if the loneliness that accompanied those steps felt like a physical ache in my chest—well, that was just the price of protecting the people I cared about. From myself, most of all.

The next morning arrived in the blink of an eye. One moment I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling in the dark, trying to quiet the thoughts that had followed me from the studio. The next, morning light was filtering through my curtains, insistent and unavoidable, and my alarm was making that particular sound that meant I'd already snoozed it twice.

I groaned and pushed myself upright. The apartment above the studio was small but comfortable—a space I'd carved out for myself over the years, filled with evidence of a life I'd built deliberately. Sketches pinned to the walls. Plants on the windowsill that I managed to keep alive through sheer stubbornness. A bed that was slightly too soft for my back but which I refused to replace because it had been a gift from my mother.

Hong had the morning free today. He'd mentioned it yesterday—something about catching up on university work, preparing for the exhibition. He'd be at his sister's place until his afternoon classes started, which meant I'd be alone with Yuki for the early shift. That was fine. Yuki was good company—professional, focused, comfortable with silence. We could work side by side without the pressure of constant conversation.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and immediately regretted it. A slight headache pulsed behind my eyes—the kind that came from sleeping poorly, thinking too much, staying up too late with thoughts that wouldn't quiet down. Not terrible, but persistent. The kind of pain that would hopefully disappear after my first coffee of the morning.

Coffee.

The thought propelled me toward the shower.

I dressed in comfortable clothes—soft pants, an old t-shirt that had seen better days, bare feet on the cool floor. The morning routine was automatic: brush teeth, check phone for urgent messages (none), do a cursory tidying of the bedroom that never seemed to stay clean for long. Small tasks that required no thought, that allowed my brain to slowly warm up before demanding anything complex from it.

The headache persisted, a dull throb that seemed to pulse in time with my heartbeat.

Coffee will fix it, I told myself. Coffee fixes everything.

I made my way to the kitchen.

The kitchen was small but functional—a narrow galley space with just enough room to move, to cook basic meals, to maintain the illusion of self-sufficiency. I'd organized it carefully when I first moved in, every item in its designated place, a system that mostly worked except when I got lazy. I'd been lazy lately.

The coffee maker sat on the counter, its red light dark, its carafe empty. I stared at it with the particular betrayal of someone who had expected one thing and received another.

Empty.

I'd forgotten to set it up last night. Forgotten to fill the reservoir, add the grounds, program the timer. I'd been too lost in thought, too consumed by the questions that wouldn't leave me alone. And now I was paying the price. I scolded myself internally—a familiar litany of you should have been more careful and this is what happens when you don't pay attention—even as I moved toward the refrigerator to assess my alternatives.

The refrigerator door was decorated with magnets collected over years of living.

A postcard from my mother's village, slightly faded from the light. A schedule for the studio that was three months out of date. A business card from a supplier I hadn't called in ages. And an angry cat. The magnet was small, round, featuring a cartoon cat with comically exaggerated fury in its eyes. Its tiny paws were raised in apparent outrage at the world. Hong had given it to me as a birthday gift, claiming it "matched my energy on Monday mornings."

I wasn't sure if I should be offended or amused. I'd settled for displaying it prominently.

Today, the angry cat held a Post-it note in place. The note was in my own handwriting, slightly smudged, the words hastily scrawled: Buy coffee and milk.

I'd written it days ago. Maybe a week ago. The memory was fuzzy. I'd definitely ignored it since then.

Past me tried to warn present me, I thought. Present me didn't listen. Present me is an idiot.

I opened the refrigerator anyway, as if looking inside might magically produce the coffee that wasn't there.

It didn't.

The refrigerator contained: half a container of leftover takeout, some vegetables that were approaching the end of their acceptable lifespan, a bottle of water, and approximately nothing useful for my current caffeine emergency. I closed the door with more force than necessary.

Fine, I thought. Instant coffee it is.

I moved to the cabinet where I kept emergency supplies—the backup options for mornings when the main system failed. Instant coffee wasn't ideal, but it was functional. It would deliver the caffeine my headache demanded, even if the taste left something to be desired. I put the kettle on, listening to the familiar click of the burner igniting, the soft hiss of gas meeting flame. Then I opened the cabinet.

The small jar of instant coffee sat exactly where I'd left it.

Empty.

The lid was still screwed on, the label still intact, but through the glass I could see the pathetic remnants—a thin coating of brown powder on the bottom, barely enough for a single, unsatisfying cup.

You've got to be kidding me.

I stood there for a moment, jar in hand, contemplating my life choices. How had I let things get this bad? How had I, a functional adult who ran a successful business, managed to run out of both regular coffee and emergency coffee at the same time?

The spiral, I realized. The last few days. You've been so caught up in your thoughts that you forgot to actually live.

It was a sobering realization, and not the kind of sobering I needed right now.

I set the empty jar back on the shelf, accepting defeat.

And that's when I saw it.

The box was purple.

Deep, rich purple, the color of twilight or expensive velvet or flowers I couldn't name. It sat at the back of the cabinet shelf, half-hidden behind the empty coffee jar, forgotten but not discarded. There was still a sparkly ribbon flower on top.

The ribbon was slightly crushed from being stored improperly, but still recognizable—a decorative element that turned an ordinary gift into something special. Someone had taken the time to make it beautiful. Someone had wanted the presentation to matter.

Herbal Infusions.

The words were printed on the side of the box in elegant gold lettering.

A Lego gift from a while ago.

The memory surfaced before I could stop it, bringing with it a cascade of images and sensations that I'd been trying to keep buried.

I still remembered it.

The day I'd first set foot in the flower shop.

Hong had dragged me there—literally grabbed my arm and pulled me down the street, insisting that I needed to "see something" without explaining what. I'd been resistant, irritable, not in the mood for whatever adventure he had planned.

I'd seen the shop before, of course. It was right there on the street, impossible to miss when I walked past every day. But I'd never actually gone in. Living above the studio had made me complacent—I went straight to the supermarket and straight back home, ignoring the other businesses in the neighborhood, treating them as scenery rather than destinations. When we entered, Hong had moved with purpose toward the back while I stayed near the entrance, looking around with the hesitant curiosity of someone who knew they didn't belong.

The shop was bigger inside than I'd expected. High ceilings that made the space feel airy, almost cathedral-like. Displays arranged in artistic clusters rather than practical rows. Flowers everywhere—in vases, in buckets, in arrangements waiting to be picked up or delivered.

But what really caught my attention was the second floor. A mezzanine level, visible from below, filled with even more plants. Orchids, I thought. Ferns. Things I couldn't identify but found beautiful anyway. And beyond the main room, through a doorway I almost missed, there was a greenhouse.

The air that drifted from that direction was different—damp, earthy, alive. I could smell soil and growth and the particular freshness of living things. It drew me forward, through the doorway, into a space that felt like stepping into another world.

The greenhouse was filled with potted plants. Not cut flowers waiting to die in pretty vases, but actual growing things—roots in soil, leaves reaching for the light, the slow patient work of photosynthesis happening all around me.

My mother would love this place.

The thought arrived unbidden, sharp with longing. She would have wandered through this space for hours, touching leaves, asking questions, absorbing information like a sponge. She would have found the Latin names for everything, would have wanted to know about care requirements and blooming seasons and propagation methods. She would have been in heaven. And I would have stood beside her, watching her face light up, feeling that particular warmth that came from seeing someone you loved experience pure joy.

God, I miss home.

The homesickness hit me then, sudden and overwhelming. Standing in a greenhouse in Bangkok, surrounded by flowers I couldn't name, thinking about a village thousands of miles away and a woman who worried about me from afar.

When I went back inside, still shaky from the unexpected emotion, Lego was there.

He was talking animatedly with Hong, his hands moving as he spoke, his whole body engaged in the conversation. I noticed the details before I could stop myself—

cataloging them automatically, the way an artist catalogs everything. His hair was in a high ponytail, exposing the graceful line of his neck. He was wearing gloves, the kind used for handling plants without damaging delicate stems. An apron covered his clothes, decorated with pins that I couldn't quite make out from this distance. And there was a name tag, official-looking, proof that he belonged here in a way I didn't.

Hong spotted me and waved me over.

"Tui! There you are. I was starting to think you'd gotten lost in the greenhouse."

"Almost did," I admitted, approaching slowly.

"This is Lego," Hong said, gesturing to his companion. "We study at the same university."

Lego turned to face me, and I felt the air leave my lungs. His eyes were large, expressive, framed by lashes that seemed impossibly long. His smile was warm and genuine, the kind of smile that made you feel like you were the only person in the room.

"Nice to meet you," he said, and his voice was gentle, almost musical. "Hong talks about you all the time."

"All good things, I hope."

"Mostly." Lego's smile widened, teasing. "He says you're a workaholic who forgets to eat and drinks too much coffee."

I shot Hong a look. "Traitor."

"Just telling the truth," Hong said, unrepentant. "You do drink too much coffee."

"There's no such thing as too much coffee."

"There is when it's your only food group."

Lego laughed at our bickering, and the sound did something to my chest—tightened something that had been loose, woke something that had been sleeping.

It was the first time I'd met one of Hong's friends. And somehow, impossibly, I already knew this one was going to matter.

After that, I couldn't seem to stop seeing him.

I saw him walk past the store in the morning, heading to the flower shop for his shift. I saw him walking from the university with Hong, their heads bent together, sharing some joke I wasn't privy to.

I saw him at the studio, appearing with increasing frequency to visit Hong or drop off merchandise or just... be there. Present. Part of the landscape of my daily life in a way I hadn't anticipated. He and Hong seemed to get closer and closer. Study sessions turned into lunch dates turned into evening hangouts. They developed inside jokes I didn't understand, references to shared experiences I hadn't witnessed.

I told myself I wasn't jealous. That the tightness in my chest when I saw them together was just... concern. Protective instinct. Worry that Hong might get hurt. I was lying to myself, and I knew it.

Then one day, the gift arrived.

It was a quiet afternoon at the studio. Lego had stopped by with Hong, ostensibly to see some new designs, but really—I suspected—just to hang out. They'd been looking at Hong's sketchbook when Lego suddenly produced a shopping bag from somewhere.

"I brought something," he announced. He pulled out two boxes—identical purple containers, decorated with sparkly ribbon flowers.

Herbal Infusions. Blooming Tea.

The packaging was beautiful. Professional. The kind of thing you'd find in an upscale tea shop or a specialty boutique.

"What's this?" I asked, accepting the box he pressed into my hands.

"Because you drink too much coffee," Lego said, and his smile was equal parts teasing and sincere. "Hong told me. I thought maybe you should have alternatives. For when you want something gentler."

"I don't need—"

"Everyone needs alternatives." Lego's expression was firm, brooking no argument. "Even stubborn people who think coffee is a personality trait."

Hong laughed. "He's got you there."

I looked at the box in my hands. At the careful ribbon, the elegant packaging, the thought that had gone into selecting it. No one had given me a gift like this in a long time. Not a birthday present or a holiday obligation, but a spontaneous gesture of care. Something given because someone noticed what I needed, even when I hadn't noticed it myself.

"Thank you," I managed, and my voice came out rougher than I intended.

Lego beamed. "You're welcome. Try the jasmine one first—it's my favorite."

And when I went up to my apartment later that night, my heart was pounding like never before. My ears were red. I could feel the heat of them, the telltale flush that meant my composure had cracked. My hands were slightly unsteady as I set the box on the counter, then picked it up again, then set it down somewhere else.

I couldn't seem to stop looking at it.

It's just tea, I told myself. It's just a gift. People give gifts all the time. It doesn't mean anything.

But the ribbon sparkled in the light. And the cardboard was smooth under my fingers. And the whole thing felt like more than it should—like a message I couldn't quite decode, a question I wasn't sure how to answer.

I put the gift away at the back of the shelf. Behind the coffee. Behind the instant coffee. Behind all the things I actually used, the things that were part of my daily routine.

But I put it away with the utmost care. Gently. Deliberately. Making sure not to crush the ribbon, not to damage the corners of the box, not to do anything that might spoil the perfect presentation.

It was just tea but it was from Lego.

And that made it precious.

And now it was back in my hand. Months later. After everything that had happened. After William, after the breakdown at the studio, after carrying Lego up these very stairs while he sobbed into my shoulder. After all the times I'd almost reached out, almost sent a message, almost let myself want something I wasn't sure I could have.

The box was slightly dusty from its exile at the back of the cabinet. The ribbon was more crushed than I remembered, its sparkle dimmed by time. But it was still here. Still intact. Still waiting.

Lego was still in his life.

Even though I'd tried to maintain distance. Even though I'd pushed the gift onto the counter like hiding it might make my feelings go away. Even though I'd convinced myself that wanting him was too dangerous, that love only ruined things, that I was better off alone.

He was still here. In the gift he'd given. In the memories I couldn't forget. In the ache that surfaced every time I let my guard down.

Still here.

The sound of the kettle pulled me from my reverie. It had reached a boil, the whistle starting its familiar shriek, steam billowing from the spout. I moved toward it automatically, years of kitchen habits taking over while my mind continued to process.

I looked at the purple box in my hands. The decision felt momentous somehow. Larger than just choosing what to drink. Like opening this box, making this tea, would be admitting something I'd been trying to deny.

It's just tea, I told myself again.

But my hands were gentle as I lifted the lid.

Inside, the box was divided into neat compartments.

Each compartment held several small spheres—tightly compressed bundles of dried flowers and tea leaves, wrapped so carefully that they looked like small, perfect treasures. There were labels on the inside of the lid, explaining each variety: jasmine, chrysanthemum, lily, osmanthus.

Try the jasmine one first, Lego had said. It's my favorite.

I selected a jasmine ball. It was small enough to fit in my palm—a compact, unassuming thing. Hard to believe that this little sphere could transform into anything significant.

I placed it in my cup—the large ceramic mug I used for morning coffee, worn and familiar and slightly chipped around the rim. Then I poured the hot water.

The transformation was immediate.

The compressed ball began to unfurl the moment the water touched it. Slowly at first, then with increasing confidence, the tightly wound leaves released their hold on each other. Petals emerged from the center—actual flower petals, preserved somehow in the compression, now reviving in the heat. They stretched outward like something waking from a long sleep, reaching toward the surface of the water.

The jasmine blossoms appeared. White and delicate, impossibly perfect after being hidden for so long. They floated to the top while the tea leaves settled below, creating layers of color—pale green and pure white and the golden amber of the brewing liquid.

I watched, transfixed.

The little ball seemed to bloom.

That was the only word for it. Bloom. Like a flower opening at dawn. Like something that had been waiting, dormant and patient, finally given what it needed to become

itself.

The steam that rose from the cup carried the scent of jasmine—sweet, floral, nothing like the bitter darkness of the coffee I usually craved. It was gentle. Calming. The kind of thing you might drink when you wanted to slow down rather than speed up.

When you want something gentler, Lego had said.

I hadn't understood what he meant then.

Maybe I was starting to understand now.

I held the cup in both hands, feeling the warmth seep into my palms. The headache was still there, but it seemed less urgent now. Less demanding. Like it had decided to wait while I attended to something more important. The jasmine flowers floated on the surface of the tea, their petals slowly spreading, their beauty fully revealed. Something that had been hidden was now visible. Something that had been compressed was now free.

Is that a metaphor? I wondered. Or am I just reading too much into a cup of tea?

Maybe both. Maybe everything was a metaphor when you were avoiding the thing you actually needed to think about.

I took a sip. The tea was delicate, subtle, nothing like the aggressive caffeine hit I usually demanded from my mornings. It tasted like flowers. Like spring. Like sitting in my mother's garden as a child, surrounded by things that grew. It tasted like something Lego would choose. Gentle. Beautiful. Unexpectedly complex beneath a simple exterior.

God, I'm in trouble.

The thought surfaced before I could stop it, honest and terrifying and impossible to deny. I was in trouble because I couldn't stop thinking about him. Couldn't stop associating him with everything soft and precious and worth protecting. Couldn't stop wanting things I'd convinced myself I shouldn't want.

I was in trouble because a box of tea was making me emotional, and the jasmine flowers floating in my cup looked like hope, and I didn't know how to be the kind of person who reached for hope without being afraid of the fall.

But I drank the tea anyway.

And watched the flowers bloom.

And tried, for just a moment, to imagine a world where love didn't have to ruin everything.

Where blooming was possible.

Where growth could happen without pain.

The morning continued. I finished the tea slowly, savoring each sip, letting the warmth spread through my chest and slowly dissolve the headache I'd woken with.

Eventually, I had to move. Had to get ready. Had to go downstairs and open the studio and start another day of work. But before I left the kitchen, I carefully closed the purple box and returned it to the cabinet. This time, I put it at the front of the shelf.

Where I could see it.

Where I could reach it again.

Where it could remind me, every morning, of the person who'd given it to me—and of the questions I still hadn't figured out how to answer.

Yuki was waiting when I got downstairs. She looked up from her preparation, taking in my expression with those observant eyes. "Good morning," she said. "You look... different."

"Different how?"

She considered the question. "Softer. Like something released."

I thought about the tea. About the jasmine flowers. About the way they'd unfurled in the hot water, becoming something larger and more beautiful than they'd seemed when compressed.

"Maybe something did," I said. Yuki smiled—brief and knowing—and returned to her work. The day began.